

**ELECTRIC ENGLISH  
CLASSICS. AN ESSAY  
ON JOHN MILTON**

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Electric English Classics. An Essay on John Milton by Lord Macaulay

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**LORD MACAULAY**

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*John Milton*

ECLECTIC ENGLISH CLASSICS

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ON  
JOHN MILTON

BY  
LORD MACAULAY



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## INTRODUCTION.

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THOMAS BABINGTON MACAULAY was born in Leicestershire, Oct. 25, 1800. Before he was ten years old he showed a decided bent for literature, and a good deal of juvenile prose and verse attests his precocity. He entered Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1818. He was averse to mathematical and scientific studies, but achieved much distinction at the university by his poems and essays, and by his speeches in the debating society. He received his degree in 1822, and four years later was admitted to the bar.

When, about this time, commercial disaster befell his father, it was plain that Macaulay, upon whom the family support devolved, could not count for maintenance upon his chosen profession of the law. At the instance of powerful friends, he was in 1828 made a commissioner of bankruptcy, and two years afterwards he entered the House of Commons as member for Calne, a pocket borough in the gift of Lord Lansdowne.

In 1834 he was appointed to a seat in the Supreme Council of India. This place he held till 1838, and the munificent salary attached to it (£10,000) gave him the independence needful for the carrying out of his great literary work, the "History of England." His "Essays," by which he is best known to the

general reader, were many of them of the nature of preliminary historical studies. Before his political preferment these pieces had served to increase Macaulay's slender income; those written after his return from India were the outcome of choice and greater leisure.

Macaulay reëntered Parliament in 1839—this time as member for Edinburgh—and became secretary of war in Melbourne's ministry. In 1846 he was paymaster general, as Chatham had been before him.

The first two volumes of his history appeared in 1848, and were followed by two more in 1855. Two years later he was raised to the peerage. He died of heart disease in December, 1859, and was buried in Westminster Abbey, in Poets' Corner, near the statue of Addison.

Macaulay lacked some of the traits we are accustomed to look for in lofty natures. We are told that he was ignorant of the deeper emotions; that his sensibilities were not delicate; that he lacked piety of mind, had no sympathy with high speculation, and displayed but little interest even in the practical problems of science and social life. On the other hand, his virtues were many and great. He was an affectionate friend, and blameless, unselfish, and magnanimous in every relation of life. His nature was simple, manly, and straightforward. He hated lies, liars, and all evil; and one of the reasons he is never dull is that he was deeply in earnest in all he wrote.

Macaulay's powers of memory were very great, and the extent of his reading has perhaps never been exceeded. Like Johnson, Coleridge, and other men of great information, he was an exuberant talker; and like most men who talk well, he was, it may be, a poor listener.



His fame rests on his "Lays of Ancient Rome," his "History of England," and his "Essays." It is with the last that we are here concerned. Though the titles of the essays suggest biography, most of them are in fact detached chapters of history.

Macaulay's style is peculiar to himself. By it he was able to give to written language a good share of the glow and rush of spoken oratory. Critics have pointed to his wealth of epithet, the rhythm of his periods, and the masterly unity of each of his pieces. Yet beyond the reach of analysis there remains a something that is Macaulay's that cannot be defined. "You will ask science in vain to tell you," says Saintsbury, "why some dozen or sixteen of the simplest words in language, arranged by one man, in one fashion, make a permanent addition to the delight of the world, while other words differently arranged by another do not."

The essay upon the poet and statesman of the Commonwealth, of which this book furnishes the text, and which appeared in the "Edinburgh Review" of 1825, while not the first of Macaulay's essays in order of composition, was the first to attract attention to the rising young barrister who had not long before come back to London from the university with a brilliant reputation, and who was already widely known in the literary and political circles of the metropolis. In spite of redundancy and ornament,—defects which are readily excusable in a youthful enthusiast, and which Macaulay himself in the maturity of his judgment condemned,—and a tendency to obscure, in the blaze of Milton's renown, some obvious blemishes of conduct and character, the essay was instantly recognized as the most remarkable contribution to the critical literature of that time,—a verdict which the lapse of nearly three quarters of a century has not disturbed.

JOHN MILTON, "organ-mouth of England," as Tennyson styles him, indisputably, after Shakespeare, the greatest of English poets, was born in London, Dec. 9, 1608. His father, whose name was also John, was by profession a scrivener. The house in Bread Street in which Milton was born, was known as the Spread Eagle, from the device of an eagle with outstretched wings over the doorway. Milton's father was himself a man of superior talents, who had been educated at Oxford University, but had afterwards embraced the doctrines of the Reformed Church. He was the poet's first teacher.

In his tenth year the son was placed under the tuition of Thomas Young, a Puritan minister and an excellent scholar. After two years he was admitted to St. Paul's, a grammar school for classical instruction chiefly, where, as he afterwards wrote, he was "seized with such eagerness for the study of humane letters, that from the twelfth year of my age I scarcely ever went from my lessons to bed before midnight; which, indeed, was the first cause of injury to my eyes."

There is evidence that before Milton's school-days were over he was not only a diligent student of English literature, but could read French and Italian, and had some knowledge of Hebrew. The father, too, though of a serious disposition, was a man of liberal culture, particularly noted as a musician and composer, and it was from him the poet received those first lessons in the delightful art which was to be the solace of his neglected age, and by which his ear was first attuned to the majestic harmonies of "Paradise Lost."

With his early readings in Spenser and in Du Bartas, a French religious poet of the sixteenth century, we must connect Milton's first efforts in English verse. Of these, the earliest that remain

are paraphrases of two of the Psalms, published in his later life with the statement that they were written in his sixteenth year, the last year of his stay at St. Paul's School.

On completing the course of study at St. Paul's, Milton was admitted a pensioner at Christ's College, Cambridge, in 1625, where he was soon distinguished for his proficiency in classical learning, and for the ease and elegance of his Latin versification. During his second academic year, in 1626, the beautiful lines "On the Death of a Fair Infant," his first original English poem, were written. Milton remained at Cambridge for seven years, taking his master's degree in 1632, in his twenty-fourth year.

On or about Christmas day, 1629, when in his twenty-first year, Milton composed the ode "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," which Hallam describes as "perhaps the most beautiful in the English language." To the same period,—that is, in 1630,—belongs the well-known epitaph on Shakespeare, which, as far as is known, was the first of Milton's writings to appear in print.

Milton's parents, in sending him to the university, had in view his entering the Church—that is, the English Church—as a profession, but to this his Puritan training and his own convictions had made him so much averse that the project was abandoned. Before leaving college, indeed, he had expressed a preference for a literary career, for which his genius and the bent of his studies had so evidently destined him; and on repairing to the new home in the village of Horton, about seventeen miles from London, to which his father had retired, he addressed himself seriously to this design. In the seclusion of this retreat, shut out from the world except during occasional visits to London, he devoted the